



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Miller Park Zoo's Junior Zookeeper program celebrates 50th Anniversary

BLOOMINGTON, IL – A celebration fifty years in the making is gearing up for the Miller Park Zoo's Junior Zookeeper program, as they reach the five decade Anniversary this summer.

"We are excited to be celebrating this iconic program," said Shannon Reedy, Miller Park Zoo Education Specialist and JZK Program Manager, adding "it will be a great experience for all current and former JZK participants to be a part of the 50th celebration reception."

The Miller Park Zoo Junior Zookeeper 50th Anniversary Celebration is set for **Saturday, July 23rd from 5:30 PM – 8:00 PM** at the Miller Park Zoo and Miller Park Pavilion. Festivities begin at the Zoo. The evening will begin in Miller Park Zoo where current JZKs will be handling our well-known program animals and refreshments will be served. JZK alumni can get reacquainted with old friends (human & animal) while discovering the newest additions to the Zoo, like the DeBrazza's monkeys and Sullivan Rohrscheib Educational Theater. At 7:15 PM the festivities will move to the Miller Park Pavilion for remarks and special recognition.

Tickets to this event are **free** to Junior Zookeeper Friends and Alumni, but registration is requested at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/miller-park-zoo-junior-zookeeper-50th-anniversary-celebration-tickets-374464472317>

History of the Miller Park Zoo Junior Zookeeper program

The Junior Zookeeper (JZK) program has been a part of Miller Park Zoo's education programs since 1972. The push for starting the program came from a small group of dedicated parents who knew the opportunities for learning at the zoo. They felt the zoo could offer children in central Illinois, a new type of educational experience, one involving classwork, projects, and volunteerism. It began with a handful of children from Bloomington-Normal and has grown to include an annual average of 240 junior high and high school students from 60 schools in eight counties throughout central Illinois. An overarching objective of the program is to support the mission of Miller Park Zoo which is to engage our community in conservation, education, and fun. Since education is a primary part of that mission, the program succeeds by providing a unique and impactful learning opportunity. In addition, participants of the program interact and share knowledge with zoo visitors, helping the zoo engage the public. And very significant is the leadership training and skills acquired by those who participate in the program.

Goals

- * Educate youth about the needs of animals in zoos and in the wild.
- * Instill and foster a conservation mindset in young people.
- * Provide opportunities for youth to apply their knowledge in a zoo setting.
- * Utilize the strengths and abilities of young people in providing interactive educational opportunities to zoo guests.

The program has evolved over the years. The current program manager has held the position since 1999. This continuity in leadership gives students a steady and predictable learning environment, which aids in their development as learners, volunteers, and leaders. The educators learn the strengths of each participant, steering them into projects and volunteer work, which will utilize their talents.

Participation Levels

The current program has four participation levels:

- * Beginner JZK
- * Intermediate JZK
- * Advanced JZK
- * Master JZK

Participants begin the program as early as the summer following 5th grade. They spend the first full year in summer camps and year-round classes (Beginner and Intermediate levels). During this period, participants can experience the program and determine their interest in continuing. Once at the Advanced level, JZKs enter a strenuous phase, committing to memory information necessary to be successful and productive volunteers, including animal facts, emergency protocols, zoo operations information, summer volunteer station procedures, and directives for offering good customer service. Advanced JZK attend classes through the school year and must meet point requirements to qualify for summer volunteering. Points are earned by attending classes, completing homework assignments, taking unit exams, and volunteering at special events. Participants remain at this level for at least two years. To move into the next level, they must demonstrate their mastery of Advanced volunteer tasks. The Master JZK level is the highest and most advanced.

Participants are offered summer volunteer positions that are very much like internships. They may choose to be a Team Leader, who mentors, supervises, and trains Advanced JZKs; a Keeper Tech, who assists the animal care staff in their daily duties; an Education Tech, who presents programs to our guests; or an Enrichment Tech, who assembles, distributes, and evaluates animal enrichment items. Master JZKs can remain in the program through the summer following high school graduation. The JZK program is unique in that it is a year-round educational program. It serves as not only a teen volunteer program, but also gives the students a tremendous opportunity for learning through classes offered during the school year. This benefits the Zoo as well: if students remain engaged at the Zoo all year, they are more likely to be active JZKs through their high school years.

Program Outcomes

The JZK program intends to graduate youth who have gained knowledge and who have gained a passion for sharing it. The program intends to ignite desire in graduates to be zoo ambassadors, interpreters, and champions for the vision for a world where all people respect, value, and conserve wildlife and wild places. While exposing guests to animals, the JZKs are learning how to make presentations and how to successfully interact with a wide variety of people as the guests are learning about the animals. This deepens their consideration for the welfare of the species with which they work, and in interacting with new people, they develop a life skill that will give them the confidence to share their knowledge with others.

Another significant outcome of the JZK program is measured in the number of hours program participants give to Miller Park Zoo each year. JZKs volunteer over 6,000 hours in a school year. This number speaks to the dedication of our JZKs and to the commitment the Zoo has made to developing this program and to the young people involved.

Successes

Interest in the program has increased steadily. Over the past five years there has been a waiting list of

over 25 applicants. 150 students are admitted each year. Most who are not accepted in the first year reapply. The retention rate of the program participants is high. 85% of participants return for a second year. The program is secure in its funding from the City of Bloomington and has the additional support from the Miller Park Zoological Society.

Annually graduates of the program pursue and are accepted in animal science and related higher education programs. JZKers who are Scouts have chosen projects at the zoo for earning the Eagle Scout badge of honor. Other JZK participants have been inspired to follow their passions because it was through this program, they learned the significance of giving your time and talents to something you are passionate about.

For more information on Miller Park Zoo events, programs and classes please visit www.millerparkzoo.org or phone (309) 434-2250.

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